Aliens, Monsters, & Madmen

THE ART OF EC COMICS

Guest-curator Ben Saunders
  Associate Professor, University of Oregon
Organized by the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art

The Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art at the University of Oregon invites your museum to participate as one of three venues for the special exhibition *Aliens, Monsters, and Madmen: The Art of EC Comics,* we are looking for an institution to open the show, mid-January through April 13, 2016 after which the JSMA will conclude the tour.

Aliens, Monsters, and Madmen: The Art of EC Comics celebrates the achievements of the most artistically and politically adventurous American comic-book company of the twentieth century: Bill Gaines's *Entertainment Comics*, better known to fans all over the world as EC. Specializing in comic-book versions of popular genre fictions—particularly Crime, Horror, War, and Science Fiction—the company did far more than merely adapt the conventions of those genres to the comics medium. In the case of the now legendary Science Fiction and Horror titles, *Weird Science* and *Tales from the Crypt*, the creators at EC actively extended those genre conventions, while simultaneously shaping the imaginations of a subsequent generation of writers and filmmakers, such as Stephen King, George Lucas, John Landis, George Romero, and Stephen Spielberg. EC also broke new ground in the realm of satire as the publisher of *MAD*, an experimental humor comic that parodied the very stories that were elsewhere its stock in trade. *MAD* became a magazine in the mid-1950s and is still in print.

Our exhibition will tell the story of the rise and fall of the EC publishing company from its foundation in 1944 through to its demise in 1956. We will chart the efforts of publisher Bill Gaines to find a niche in the competitive world of comics publishing during the 1940s, when titles sold in the millions. After a number of failed experiments in the Romance, Western, and Superhero genres, Gaines struck gold with his Crime and Horror books, which he swiftly followed with a series of Science Fiction and War titles featuring stories of unusual sophistication. These comics were generally more daring, both politically and artistically, than other forms of popular media of the period, including most movies. In the guise of genre fiction, EC explored serious "real world" issues, such as racism, lynching, jingoism, drug addiction, and corruption within the legal system, in tales illustrated by some of the best creators in the field.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, EC also became the focus of controversy and the target of a national "anti-comics" movement. Gaines himself was subjected to hostile questioning before a Senate subcommittee on the supposed negative social impact of comics; and by 1956, his company had been driven out of business by the forces of reaction—with the single exception of *MAD*, which became a magazine to avoid the censor. Our exhibition will demonstrate that, in the face of moralized hysteria and political demagoguery, EC comics represent one of the first great flowerings of American comic-book art.

Drawn from the largest private collections in the county, the exhibition features roughly 130 original pages by some of the most highly regarded American comic-book artists of the last century, including Johnny Craig, Reed Crandall, Jack Davis, Will Elder, Al Feldstein, Frank Frazetta, Graham Ingels, Bernie Krigstein, Harvey Kurtzman, Joe

Orlando, Al Williamson, and Wally Wood. The show is organized chronologically and by genre, beginning with a few examples drawn from EC's early experiments with Romance, Western, and Superhero titles, before devoting the lion's share of the exhibition to covers and interior pages from EC's peak-period Crime, Horror, War, and Science Fiction comics—as well as a section showcasing the same artists' satirical work from the pages of *MAD*. We also examine Gaines's various late efforts to reach a more adult audience with the illustrated magazine format, as well as his attempt to create less provocative but still aesthetically accomplished "adventure" comics.

Finally, because the best work at EC was a seamless blend of verbal and visual storytelling—the very essence of great comic art—we will display several famous stories in their entirety: these complete stories will include Johnny Craig's "Touch and Go," Jack Davis's "Foul Play," Harvey Kurtzman's "Corpse on The Imjin," and Wally Wood's "Three Dimensions." Visitors to the show will, therefore, have an opportunity previously enjoyed by only a privileged handful of individuals: to read a classic EC tale from beginning to end, from the original production art, thereby enjoying all the details of rendering that were inevitably lost in the comic-book printing process.

Aliens, Monsters, and Madmen: The Art of EC Comics will be accompanied by a major publication, produced by IDW press. In addition to more than fifty images, the book will include essays by guest curator Ben Saunders, novelist Glen David Gold, comics scholar Charles Hatfield, and comics editor Diana Schutz. It is intended to be the best researched and most comprehensive exhibition and book to date on EC.

Guest curator Ben Saunders is a professor in the Department of English at the University of Oregon, where he specializes in the poetry and drama of the English Renaissance. He recently initiated a Comics Studies minor at the university and was the guest curator of the JSMA's special exhibition *Faster Than a Speeding Bullet: The Art of the Superhero.*

The JSMA is offering the exhibition to three venues. We anticipate that it will fill our 4000 sf special exhibitions gallery (but could be in a smaller space with temporary walls) and will be made available for a rental fee of $12,000 plus one-way shipping.

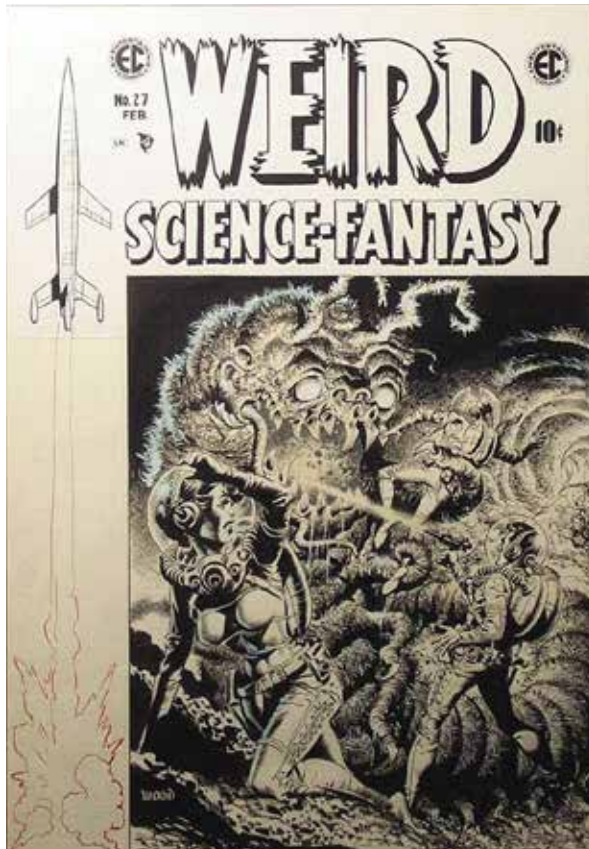Contact: Jill Hartz, Executive Director, JSMA, hartz@uoregon.edu or 541-346-0972

Frank Frazetta
Weird Science-Fantasy #29: Cover art, 1955
Pen, brush, and ink on Bristol board, 23 x 30 inches

Frank Frazetta is most famous today for his oil paintings, which have graced fantasy paperbacks, album sleeves, and movie posters, and now sell for hundreds of thousands of dollars apiece. However, Frazetta began his career in comics and produced some of his finest work in that medium for EC. This cover is representative of his fluid depiction of dramatic action. (Until recently, it also held the distinction of being the most expensive piece of comic art ever sold at auction, having last changed hands for over $340,000.)
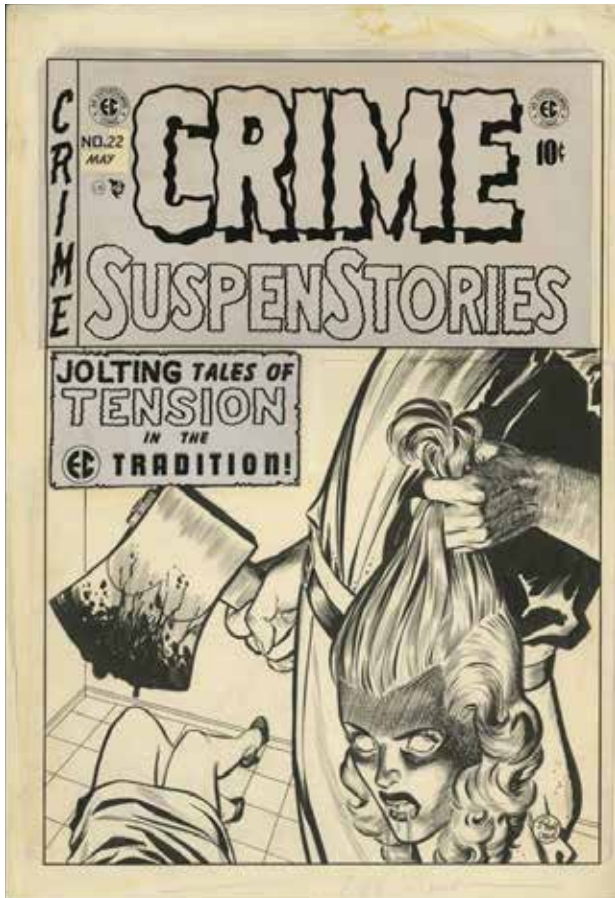

Wally Wood
Weird Science-Fantasy #27: Cover art, 1955
Pen, brush, and ink on Bristol board, 13 x 19 inches

More than any other single artist, Wally Wood defined the imaginative look of Science Fiction during the 1950s—the golden age of the genre. His gleaming rocket ships, bug-eyed and slimy monsters, and vivid alien landscapes have become emblematic—capturing an entire era of fantasy. Wood did some of his best work for EC adapting the classic SF stories of Ray Bradbury; our exhibit will also feature at least one of these stories in its entirety.
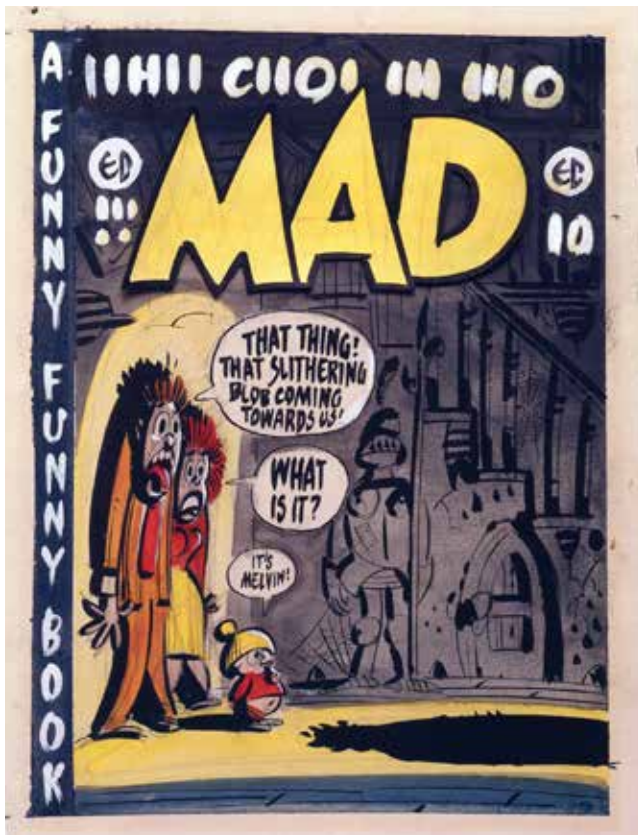
Johnny Craig
Crime SuspenStories #22: Cover art, 1953
Pen, brush, and ink on Bristol board, 13 x 19 inches

It is easy to see why parents and politicians were provoked by covers such as this; in fact, this particular cover was singled out for scorn by Senator Estes Kefauver during the 1954 Senate Subcommittee hearings on the negative social impact of comic books. Johnny Craig had an obvious knack for sensationalism; but he was also a consummate cinematic storyteller, as visitors to the exhibition will see from our complete presentation of a remarkable eight-page story by Craig entitled "Touch and Go."
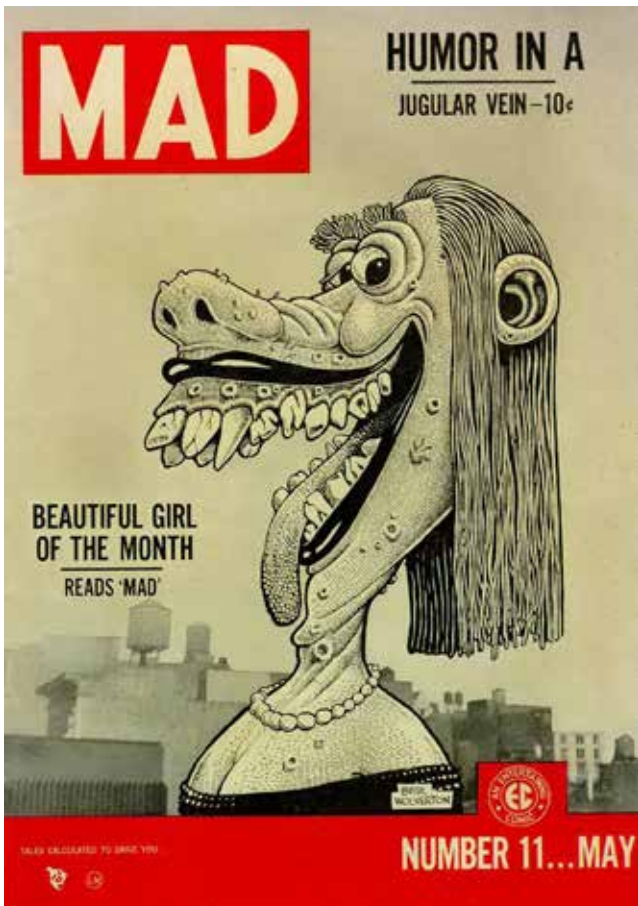

Graham Ingels
Haunt of Fear #25: cover art, 1954
Pen, brush, and ink on Bristol board, 13 x 18 inches

Ingels is widely considered the master of American Horror comics. Note his exquisite rendering of surfaces and textures here, in this depiction of a classic Horror-genre motif: "what menace lurks on the other side of that door?" Our exhibition will feature several more works by Ingels including all eight pages of his most famous story: "Horror We? How's Bayou?"
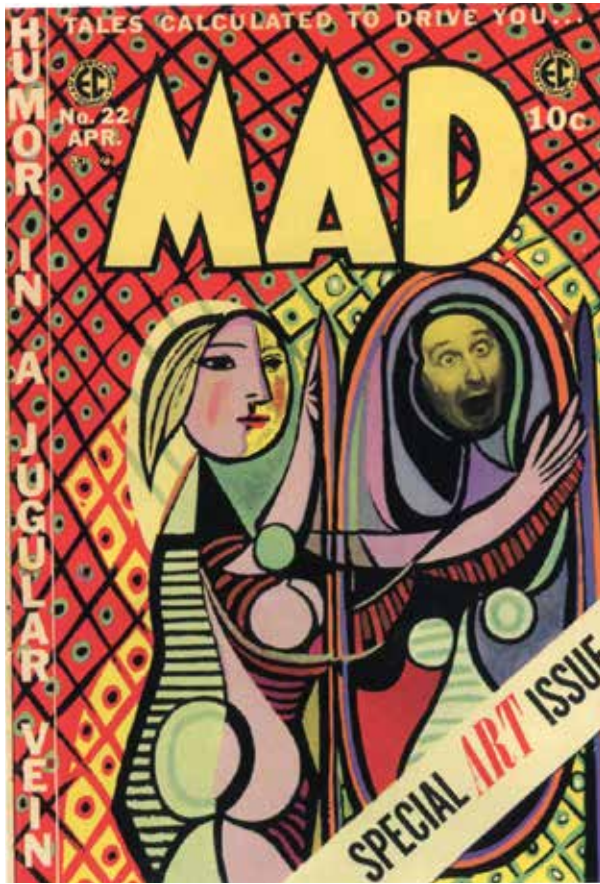
Harvey Kurtzman
MAD #1: Cover concept art, 1952
Pencil, ink, and watercolor, 9 x 12 inches

When Harvey Kurtzman created this image for the cover of the first issue of his new humor comic, he could not have known he was founding one of the most important institutions in the history of American satire. More than sixty years later, *MAD* is still going strong.

Basil Wolverton
MAD #11: Cover art, 1954
Pen and ink on Bristol board, 13 x 19 inches

This is one of several iconic early *MAD* covers we will feature in our exhibition. This famous image showcases cartoonist Basil Wolverton's talent for the grotesque. (Note: Image shown is the published cover; the original art, which will be featured in the exhibition, is brighter and cleaner, with detailed "stipple-effect" pen work visible.)

Harvey Kurtzman
MAD #22: Cover art, 1955
Pen, brush, ink, and collage on Bristol board,
13 x 19 inches

Unlike other comic book publishers of the period, Bill Gaines encouraged his artists to forge individual rather than "house" styles, and allowed them to sign their work. Here, Harvey Kurtzman went a step further, devoting this entire issue of *MAD* to the work of his chief co-conspirator, Will Elder, and creating this parodic image, complete with a picture of a mugging Elder, for the cover. (Note: Image shown is the published cover; the original art will be featured in the show.)
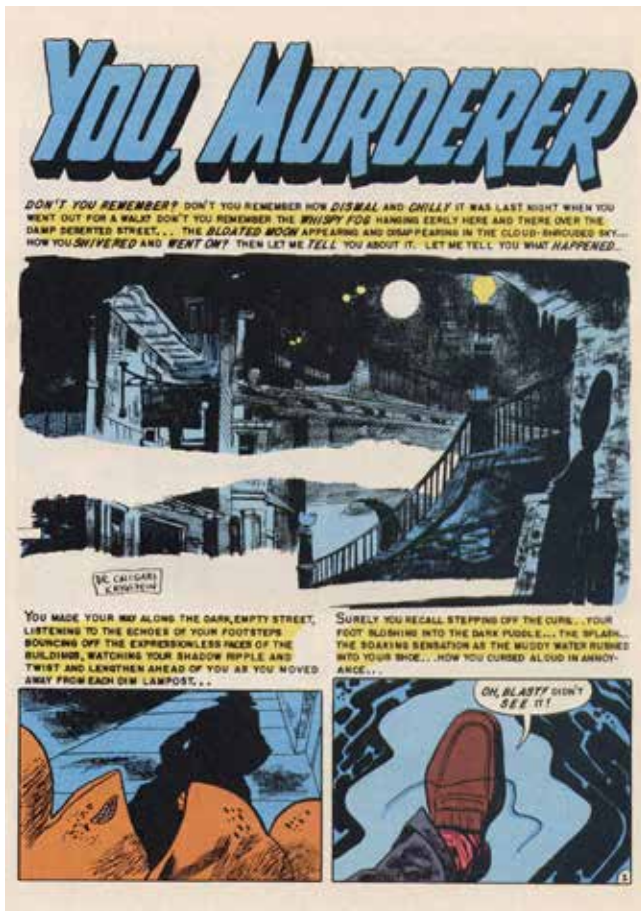

Harvey Kurtzman
Frontline Combat #7: cover art, 1952
Pen, brush, and ink on Bristol board, 13 x 19 inches

In stark contrast to his work as a humorist, Kurtzman produced some of the most powerful and anti-jingoist war comics of the 20th century for EC's *Two-Fisted Tales* and *Frontline Combat* (titles he also edited). Here, he boldly refuses the techniques of a conventional illustrative verisimilitude for cartoonish abstraction to produce one of the most powerful covers ever to grace a War comic book with this depiction of an exhausted, haunted infantryman. (Our exhibition will also feature at least one complete Kurtzman war story: the acclaimed "Corpse On The Imjin!")

Wally Wood
"Three Dimensions!" from *MAD* #12, 1954
Pen, brush, ink, and zipatone on Bristol board, five pages, each at 13 x 19 inches (pages 3–5 depicted)

Although best remembered for his "serious" Science-Fiction work, Wood was a regular contributor to *MAD*. This critically acclaimed story parodies the then popular vogue for 3-D comics. Notice the representation of a torn hole in page three, through which page five can be glimpsed (and which has further consequences for the story on page four). The comic panels themselves are depicted as collapsing on page five, the contents sliding away; in the original publication, page six was printed as a complete blank.

Bernard Krigstein
"You, Murderer!" from *Shock SuspensStories* #9, 1954
Pen, brush, and ink on Bristol board, seven pages
at 13 x 19 (page one depicted)

Krigstein, who abandoned comics for a career as a fine art painter in the late 1950s, is nowadays regarded as one of the most ambitious and experimental artists to have worked at EC. This expressionistic and cinematic story was a revision of "The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari" for a comic book audience. (Note: Image shown is from the printed version of the story; original is black and white, with far more detail visible.)

Sheldon Moldoff
Moon Girl #3: cover art, 1948
Pen, brush, and ink on Bristol board, 13 x 19 inches

"Moon Girl" represents a failed early attempt at a superhero title. Interestingly, EC never enjoyed success in this most well known of comic book genres, and even its single attempt departs from the standard "strong-man-in-tights" format in favor of the less commonly seen female hero. But in just a couple of years the company would find itself outselling even Superman and Batman with their Science Fiction and Horror books.

Al Feldstein
Modern Love #8: cover art, 1952
Pen, brush, and ink on Bristol board, 7 pages,
13 x 19 inches each

Romance comics were hugely popular between 1947 and 1954, but EC never enjoyed the same sales as its rivals in this field. In fact, soon after drawing this cover, Feldstein would abandon the Romance genre altogether for EC's lucrative line of Horror books, where he would serve as chief editor, writer, and artist. Examples of his work as a Horror artist are also featured in this show. Feldstein later took over the reigns of *MAD* after founder artist Harvey Kurtzman's departure.

Jack Davis
"Foul Play!" from *Haunt of Fear* #19, 1953
Pen, brush, and ink on Bristol board, 7 pages,
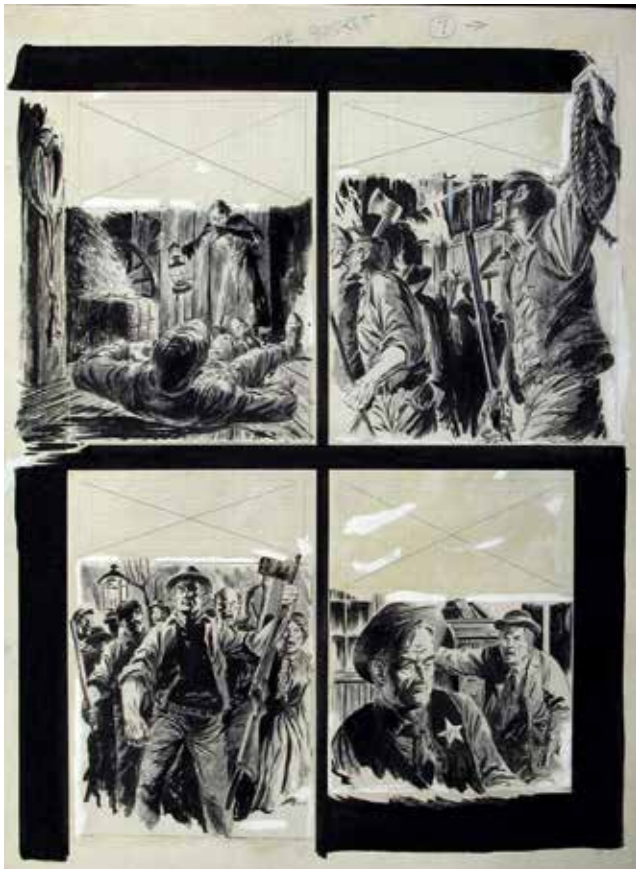13 x 19 inches each (page seven depicted)

This example presents one of the most notorious EC tales, about a corrupt and arrogant baseball player; on this final page, we see his head being used as a baseball. Artist Jack Davis was a master of satirical stories at *MAD*, and there is palpable humor in his treatment of this topic (also apparent in the punning title). Unfortunately, the joke was lost on the politicians and parents of the era.

Graham Ingels. "The Basket." From *Terror Illustrated* #1: page 1, 1955
Ink wash and white paint, 1 of 2 pages, 13 x 19 inches each

When censorship forced publisher Bill Gaines to discontinue his most popular Horror and Science Fiction comics, he created a line of illustrated magazines using the same writers and artists. Thus, these pages from "The Basket," by Graham Ingels, represent a generic hybrid, combining the illustrated short story with the comic page (note the large space for text and the absence of word balloons). Gaines had trouble marketing his "picto-fiction" magazines, as he called them, and none lasted more than four issues; but the higher production values encouraged artists such as Ingels and Crandall to produce some of their most lavishly detailed work.

Graham Ingels
"The Basket." From *Terror Illustrated* #1: page 9, 1955
Ink wash and white paint, 1 of 2 pages, 13 x 19 inches each.
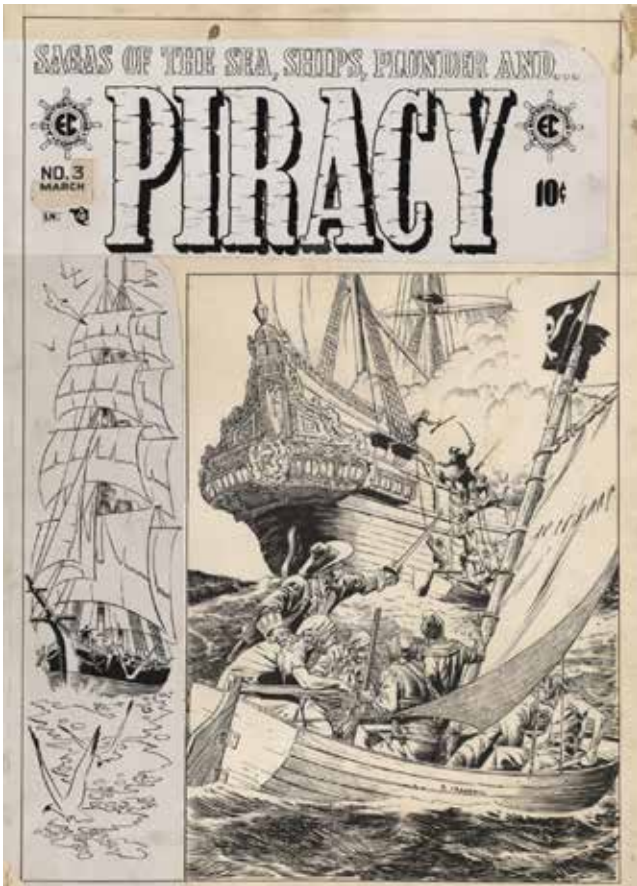
See above.

Jack Davis
"Vital Items You Can Buy For A Quarter!" from *MAD* #30:
Inside back cover, 1956
Ink wash and gouache on Bristol Board, 18 x 18 inches

Though Jack Davis also drew some of EC's most
notorious Horror stories (see for example the final
page from "Foul Play" reproduced here), he was most
at home in the satirical world of *MAD*.

Al Williamson and Roy Krenkel
"Food For Thought" from *Incredible Science Fiction* #32,
1955
Pen and ink on Bristol board, 8 pages, 13 x 19 each
(page one depicted here)

After Wally Wood, EC's greatest SF illustrator was Al
Williamson. His detailed pencils are here particularly
complemented by Roy Krenkel's feather-like dry-brush
inking; no printed version of the story has yet done
justice to the details visible in the original.

Reed Crandall
Piracy #6: cover art, 1955
Pen, brush, and ink on Bristol board, 13 x 19 inches

Following the Senate hearings and anti-comics hysteria of 1954, EC also launched titles specializing in less provocative "adventure" genres. Despite lush, detailed covers like this one by Reed Crandall (a self-conscious homage to the illustration art of Howard Pyle), sales were disappointing. EC would soon abandon the comic-book format altogether; *MAD* alone would survive, by becoming a magazine and hence avoiding the censor.